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SUBJECT: LEE KYUNG-SOOK DISCUSSES TRANSITION TEAM PRIORITIES

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: During a meeting with the Ambassador, Presidential Transition Committee Chair Lee Kyung-sook discussed the political realities of the transition team's agenda and President-elect Lee Myung-bak's personal management style. Lee Kyung-sook, who is clearly one of the president-elect's biggest fans, opined that Lee Myung-bak and President Bush would get along very well, though a summit would probably not happen until after the April 9 National Assembly elections. Lee Kyung-sook made it clear that the transition team is focused on cabinet selection and ministry restructuring in order to position the new administration to accomplish as much as possible in the six weeks between the February 25 inauguration and the National Assembly elections. Lee Kyung-sook is considered a frontrunner for the Prime Minister position, despite her insistence that she plans to return to her post as president of Sookmyung Women's University on February 24. End Summary.

National Assembly Relations

12. (SBU) Lee Kyung-sook told the Ambassador in a January 11 meeting that some of the plans for downsizing the government will be enacted by the transition team, but the first priority was installing the new cabinet before the inauguration. She said the President-elect will try to work closely with the Grand National Party (GNP) because the party would implement policy. The Transition Team's foreign policy team chief, Rep. Park Jin, interjected that the transition team has regular consultations with the GNP and they hope to reestablish a channel of communication between the Blue House and the National Assembly. Lee Kyung-sook said the progressive United New Democratic Party (UNDP) has to support the ministry restructuring plans because it is an initiative the public supports.

"Waterway"

13. (SBU) Lee Kyung-sook said the "waterway" (vice "canal") project will take time. (Park Jin explained that "waterway" was a more accurate description because the project will really just connect existing rivers, the Han and Nakdong.) First the administration has to consult with professionals,

galvanize public opinion -- probably by holding a public hearing on the project -- and attract investors. Lee Kyung-sook said it will likely be one to two years before construction begins. She said that when engineers see the plans, they cannot understand why there is criticism of the project because it will be so beautiful. She also said that environmentalists complain that it will damage the environment, but, in fact, the waterway will actually clean water that is now polluted, and she made the expected analogy to the way Lee Myung-bak cleaned up Cheonggye Stream in downtown Seoul.

Leadership Style

¶4. (SBU) Lee Kyung-sook said Lee Myung-bak will be a democratic but strong leader, repeating several times that Korea was very lucky to have such a good leader. The new president will get rid of "NATO" -- no action, talk only -- leadership. Lee told the Ambassador that the President-elect knows the U.S. well and thinks the relationship between the two countries should be stronger. She also expected that Lee Myung-bak and President Bush would get along very well; they have a similar way of thinking and are very "globalized" in their outlook. She said the president-elect has a very open, westernized style and a casual way of conducting meetings.

Summit Timing

¶5. (SBU) According to Lee Kyung-sook, there needs to be some kind of symbolic gesture during Lee Myung-bak's first presidential visit to the U.S. to show the people of Korea that the bilateral relationship is improving, in turn making people feel more secure. Lee Kyung-sook was doubtful that Lee Myung-bak would go to the U.S. before the National Assembly elections in April. She said, because of all the restructuring and needed "cleaning up," there was too much to do. The Ambassador suggested that the best thing to do was to decide the date and get on the White House calendar as soon as possible.

Visa Waiver Program

¶6. (SBU) Lee Kyung-sook asked the Ambassador about the status of visa waiver. She also raised the oft-asked issue of setting up special work visas for young Koreans, along the lines of the recently established U.S. arrangement with Australia, that would allow Korean students to spend one year working or studying in the U.S.

Bio Note

¶7. (SBU) Lee Kyung-sook conducted the entire meeting in English, despite her staff's insistence that the Ambassador bring an interpreter. While she struggled occasionally to find the right word and it seemed her vocabulary was somewhat limited, she spoke comfortably.

Comment

¶8. (C) Lee Kyung-sook is a practical leader who is well regarded thanks to her long and successful stewardship of Sookmyung Women's University. Her close connection with the President-elect through Somang Presbyterian Church leaves her in good standing to take a top position in the Lee administration. Most press and Lee advisers predict she will finish her term as president of Sookmyung in 2010, but it is likely her stint as head of the transition team will not be her last time working closely with Lee. While she is not a

political lightweight, it remains unclear if she is taking orders from someone (e.g., Lee Sang-deuk, Choi Shee-joong) or if she is calling the shots in the transition team. Regardless, she has kept the transition team productive and on message and most expect the team to achieve much before the inauguration.

VERSHBOW